

From Gaza to Tehran:

Looking toward the Obama Administration and the Middle East

Jan 13, 2009



Brief Analysis

On January 9, 2009, David Brooks, Peter Beinart, and Robert Satloff addressed a Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss the Obama administration and its likely approach to the Middle East. Mr. Brooks is a New York Times columnist and regular commentator on both The Newshour with Jim Lehrer and National Public Radio; Mr. Beinart is editor-at-large of the New Republic and a columnist for the Washington Post. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=2989\)](#) of Dr. Satloff's remarks. [Listen \(templateC07.php?CID=439\)](#) to complete audio of their conversation.

David Brooks

Barack Obama has several traits that could benefit him as president. Those who know him describe Obama as highly perceptive, which has enabled him to pick excellent people to serve in his administration on both foreign and domestic policy. In particular, he has chosen evidence-based, realistic people for foreign affairs. And based on the economic policy he has put forward, it is also clear that he is willing to listen to advisors.

Obama is also self-confident. This could be his greatest asset or his greatest liability. In addition to several other remarkably self-confident comments made off the record, Obama stated that he was a better speechwriter than his speechwriters, more knowledgeable about policy than his policy directors, and a better political analyst than his political analysts. He also says he knows foreign policy better than domestic policy. But this self-confidence may have caused him to structure his administration in a potentially problematic manner. He is attempting to encourage debate by structuring his administration in a way similar to that of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. To a degree even greater than FDR, Obama has created redundant policy teams on economics and foreign policy, which will cause intense rivalry for his attention. His decision to assemble an all-star foreign policy team, in addition to appointing several czars, may create significant personality clashes. If he is hoping for a team of rivals, he may end up with more rivals than team. Individually, his appointees are all great, but they may not work well together.

Obama's calmness, which was demonstrated during his debates with John McCain, and his great intellectual power will be assets. For instance, he is very knowledgeable about Reinhold Niebuhr's philosophy, which suggests that he is a liberal realist who believes that although power corrupts, it ought to be used. This is offset, however, by a hardheaded, tragic view adopted also from Niebuhr. He has indicated that he would refuse to engage groups such as Hamas and Hizballah, and would deal with them by providing social services to wean their constituencies away from them. He also revealed that he would be more supportive of democracy in Lebanon than the Bush administration.

The reality is that the Obama administration is overburdened with foreign policy issues. Although he would like to resolve the Iraq war quickly and then leave the issue behind, this is unlikely to happen. Furthermore, Obama will have to focus on domestic policy during his first two years in office, spending much less time and energy on foreign policy issues. As a result, Israel will likely have to handle Iran alone. It also means that the administration is not likely to be as involved in the Arab-Israeli conflict as previously anticipated.

Peter Beinart

There are two ways to predict how a politician will shape foreign policy after assuming office. The first is to look at the politician's beliefs, words, and actions; the other is to examine the upcoming challenges.

George Bush, in a departure from the typical conservative paradigm, took on a number of ambitious ideological and military commitments that Obama will inherit. Bush's two main initiatives -- the War on Terror and the promotion of democracy -- were so broadly defined that they are unachievable. It is simply not possible to go after every state that has an authoritarian government and every state that supports terror against the United States or Israel.

The result was the creation of a foreign policy bubble. When the United States had a strong military and economy, it was easy to invest in military operations. But now that the situation has changed, the foreign policy bubble has burst and no one believes it is possible to have a quick war anymore. The military is exhausted, the public is opposed to military action, and we are constrained financially by the weak economy. And in addition to the weakening of our hard power resources, our soft power has also declined. The Chinese economic model is currently outpacing that of liberal democracies, thereby providing nations with an alternative to following our lead.

The Obama administration is stuck with a huge to-do list left over from the Bush years. Iran will be central in Obama's foreign policy, since it is involved with problems relating to Iraq, Lebanon, and Israel. If Obama were able to bring Iran back into the U.S. orbit, it would remove many items on this agenda. This strategy would be similar to Nixon's engagement of China in the 1970s, where he achieved his objectives by dividing and conquering, rather than containing. The Obama administration may also be open to discussions with Syria. Israel has already been talking indirectly to the Syrians, using Turkish intermediaries.

Whenever a country overextends itself, foreign policy realism returns. The difficulty with this realism is that it looks amoral and defeatist. Obama may be able to avoid this image if he projects his foreign policy goals as being based on dignity, not a nebulous concept of freedom. He could also soften the blow if he uses environmental policy as a tool for engagement.

Bush likes to compare himself to Truman and his successor to Eisenhower. In other words, although Obama denounced Bush during his campaign, Obama will ultimately follow the same grand strategy with only a little tinkering. The Truman/Eisenhower analogy has something to it, but not in the way Bush sees it. Eisenhower got America out of Korea, which Truman could not do. He also made the critical decision not to get America militarily involved in Vietnam as the French were being defeated. He did much more than tinker; he limited the globalist trajectory that Truman had launched in his second term. This was critical for the "solvency" of U.S. policy in the 1950s. In that sense, Obama could turn out to be an Eisenhower-like figure.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Lauren Cohen. ❖

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